



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

## Religious Rights and Wrongs

by Thomas Fleming

The Vice President was in Russia in September, trying to persuade Boris Yeltsin to amend legislation giving the Russian Orthodox Church a privileged position. Al Gore was just the man to explain religious toleration to the Russians. In the 1996 campaign, he revealed himself as an affirmative action fundraiser, willing to solicit donations from anyone, regardless of race, creed, national origin, or the laws of the United States.

The Russians were unmoved by American protests, arguing that other U.S. allies (e.g., Saudi Arabia and Israel) have established religions and pointing out that pluralism is not one of their religious traditions. Exasperated with Russian obtuseness, Gore told reporters that he had “tried very hard to explain exactly why we Americans feel so strongly about this.”

How strongly Americans “feel” about religious toleration is not a question that can be easily answered. The usual arguments—that America was founded by people seeking freedom of conscience—is as big a lie as anything included in the National History Standards. Some of us came looking for gold or, more often, for free land; and those who did come for religious reasons were looking for some piece of ground where they could establish their own brand of piety as the exclusive creed. In the beginning, virtually every sect made as much trouble for religious rivals as it could. The Yankee Puritans were the most brutally intolerant, but even the Philadelphia Quakers, in their own style of passive-aggression, refused to take steps to protect the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who settled the Pennsylvania back country. If Indians went on a spree and wiped out a settlement, the Quakers blamed the Calvinists and defended the Indians as harmless children of nature. Maryland Catholics

did tolerate Protestants, but that was a condition of their settlement.

The most significant movement toward pluralism was made in South Carolina, where an Anglican ruling class had to reckon with a numerous and well-organized Calvinist opposition. The balance in the colony then changed with the arrival of Huguenots from France. Although they were expected to join forces with their Calvinist brethren from Britain, the Huguenots had eaten their fill of religious strife and were content with the right to use a French version of the Book of Common Prayer.

Religious toleration was a kind of inevitable necessity imposed by life on the frontier. The constant threat of attacks by French and Spanish Catholics (to say nothing of Indian devil-worshipers) inspired a sense of camaraderie among Protestants which, in the Southern states, spilled over to include Catholics as well. The Hibernian Society established in Charleston at the end of the 18th century was a collaborative venture of Catholics and Orangemen, and Grady McWhiney has pointed out that many early Irish settlers were not Protestants but Catholics who, coming to a wilderness without priests, decided to make do with the other Irish religion.

If the spirit of toleration only took root in America by accident, it remains true that religious pluralism (at least since the edict of Milan) is a phenomenon peculiar to Western Europe (particularly Great Britain) and North America. It was not always so, of course. The English and Scots were excellent persecutors, and Henry VIII, lovable butcher that he was, burned Lutheran and Catholic with equal zest—the one for his heresy, the other for his treason. The English Civil War was the worst

religious conflict between the 30 Years' War and the *Vendée* (when the revolutionary government in France waged a war of extermination against the Catholics). The English quit persecuting only when the ruling class, in the course of the 18th century, lost its faith.

If Puritans, Anglicans, and Baptists learned, almost by accident, to endure each other's presence in the New World, imperial Rome was a precursor of modern states that are tolerant by deliberate policy. Roman citizens were free to believe anything they liked and permitted to practice virtually any religion. The most notable exceptions to imperial multiculturalism were Druids, who performed human sacrifices, and the Christians whose enmity to the human race supposedly drove them to commit even viler abominations. The Empire was tolerant precisely because Rome was no longer the religious nation described by Polybius, who attributed her success to the ingrained piety of the Roman people. During their rise to greatness, Romans were severe against those who taught newfangled philosophies or took part in exotic cults, expelling the former and executing (on at least one famous occasion involving bacchanals) the latter.

True believers can never be entirely tolerant, and it was a sign of flagging enthusiasm rather than charity when American Protestants began thinking kindly of Catholics. The leftist answer to this sort of argument is an ironic shrug of the shoulders. For people like Christopher Hitchens, religious freedom is merely an excuse for dismantling Christian institutions—along with the other artifacts of the old order, such as good manners, respect for women, a sense of honor. Hitchens displayed his contempt for all these “feudal” remnants when he provided the color commentary for the funeral of Mother Teresa.

For many professed civil libertarians, freedom of religion is only a tactic. Their real object is the old Jacobin desire to found a new religion of anti-Christianity. The followers of Robespierre staged a bacchanalian festival of reason to inaugurate their worship of the Supreme Being (a god made in the image of the “incorruptible” leader himself). Here in Jacobin America, we have established a counter-Christian calendar. We celebrate the earth goddess during National Women's Month, pay homage to the proletariat on Labor Day, reverse the state on le 4 juillet, and pay perpetual adoration to the ghost of the deified King.

More moderate civil libertarians—Girondists, Kerenskys, and country club Republicans—see religious freedom as an end in itself rather than as one phase in the revolution (which is what it is). Pete DuPont, appearing on C-SPAN, compared the Russian law to protectionism in the United States. I hope Governor DuPont never has to campaign in a Greek or Russian neighborhood; Orthodox voters might not appreciate the comparison of their religion to an aging rustbelt industry.

Most Americans are firmly convinced that everyone in the world is just like them, except for minor differences of hair-coloring and table manners. I have several times run into otherwise intelligent businessmen who thought that learning Russian would be a snap, because the only real obstacle was the Cyrillic alphabet. Governor DuPont naturally assumed that Russian clerics were as weak-kneed and defensive as an American Methodist and was shocked to discover that Russian Orthodox priests actually liked the idea of a church establishment.

No one, fundamentally, likes competition. We would all like to bet on a sure thing—a rigged wheel, a fixed race, inside

information—and there is hardly a Christian church or sect that has not toyed with the idea of establishment: Anglicans and Puritans in Britain and America, Calvinists in Switzerland and Scotland, Lutherans in Germany (to say nothing of Orthodox and Catholic establishments). Smaller sects, even when they do not achieve political dominance, are sometimes more socially predominant than established churches: the Mormons in Utah are the most obvious example, but the Amish and Mennonites are subject to a strict, even oppressive, theocracy.

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According to Alain de Benoist and his followers, Christianity is inherently intolerant, always tending toward theocracy and persecution. So far as the clergy is concerned, Benoist is quite correct. Their church is their profession, and if they have any integrity, they are naturally inclined to eliminate not just heresies, but any challenge to the church's authority. The only honest motive for ecumenism is imperialism, the desire to gain some measure of control over the other fellow's church. The usual blather emanating from the World Council of Churches—about mutual trust, the common values and traditions of all Christians, etc.—is only a confession of impotence and infidelity. Some Orthodox leaders have tried to persuade their churches to secede from the WCC, and it will be a happy day for Christendom when they succeed.

But the church is not the only human institution with a divine mission. Political authority, as Paul and Luther were fond of reminding us, also derives from God, and the tension between Pope and Emperor, Patriarch and Czar, John Knox and the troublesome Scottish lords, is fundamental to a Christian order. Of course, every church likes to think it has the model system. Catholics condemn the Orthodox establishments as “Caesaropapism,” while Protestants despise the Catholics as priest-ridden. (By the way, I don't know of any groups so priest-ridden as the servile followers of charismatic evangelical leaders.) But perfection is not to be sought here on earth, even in the far-flung provinces of the Kingdom of God that claim to represent the Church Universal.

The most that a cautious man might say is that we have the churches we deserve. Russian Orthodoxy is too brilliant and gaudy for our severe, Genevan taste—“caviar to the general”—but the Russian soul will never be nourished on law and gospel sermons and four-square hymns on a five-note scale. When the United States produces a Dostoyevsky or even a Rachmaninoff, it will be time for our clergy to go off on a raid to steal the Russian sheep.

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# If God Ran the State Department

by D. George Leech



Anna Myreck-Wodecki

“**I**n the Name of the most Holy & undivided Trinity.” Thus begins the Treaty of Paris (1783) by which Great Britain formally conceded the existence of the independent United States of America. This matter-of-fact invocation of the Triune God of Christianity stands in sharp contrast to the stirring tributes to human authority in the opening words of the documents usually cited as the foundations of the American republic: the Declaration of Independence (“When in the Course of human events . . .”) and our second, and theoretically our current, constitution (“We the People of the United States . . .”). In fact, as the deed to our national existence, the Treaty of Paris is arguably *the* American founding document. The fact that the Christian invocation was *pro forma* for the times says as much about the times as the principle: the United States took its place among the nations of the world as an explicitly Christian polity.

With the possible exceptions of Puritan New England and the incipient state of Deseret, the United States has never been a *theocracy* in the sense that the ecclesiastical establishment ruled the civil. But until recently, it was unarguably a *thearchy* since public authorities, at all levels, from the schoolmarm leading her students in the Lord’s Prayer to the President and the Supreme Court, openly affirmed Christianity (in its Protestant iteration) as the uncontested ruling ethos. The herald of liberty, Patrick Henry, proclaimed: “It cannot be emphasized too strongly or too often that this great nation was founded, not by religionists, but by Christians, not on religions but on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

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In sharp contrast to our current legal fictions, Justice Joseph Story, a preeminent expositor of our constitutional order (when we still had one), elucidated: “The real objective of the First Amendment was not to countenance, much less to advance, Mohammedanism, or Judaism, or infidelity, by prostrating Christianity, but to exclude rivalry among Christian sects, and to prevent any national ecclesiastical establishment patronage of the national government,” and, in particular, to protect the then-established churches of several states. That a Christian America had an international mission was attested to by John Adams: “The destiny of America is to carry the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all men everywhere.” Even as late as 1905, U.S. Supreme Court Justice David Josiah Brewer could state at Harvard University: “This Republic is classified among the Christian nations of the world. . . . We constantly speak of this Republic as a Christian nation—in fact, as the leading Christian nation of the world. The popular use of the term certainly has significance. It is not a mere creation of the imagination.”

Today, in what Don Feder has rightly called Pagan America, such sentiments have only a quaint antiquarian significance; if uttered today, they would be offensive and subversive. The constitutionalism of Story and Brewer has long since given way to the lawlessness of Stevens and Breyer and their ilk. As if their conscious intent were to vex the shade of Justice Story, our judicial authorities act precisely to prostrate Christianity while giving official protection to pernicious cults that would have scandalized the Founding Fathers. The exemplar, of course, is the Supreme Court’s extension of First Amendment protections to Afro-Caribbean animal sacrifices in *Church of The Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. City of Hialeah* (1993).